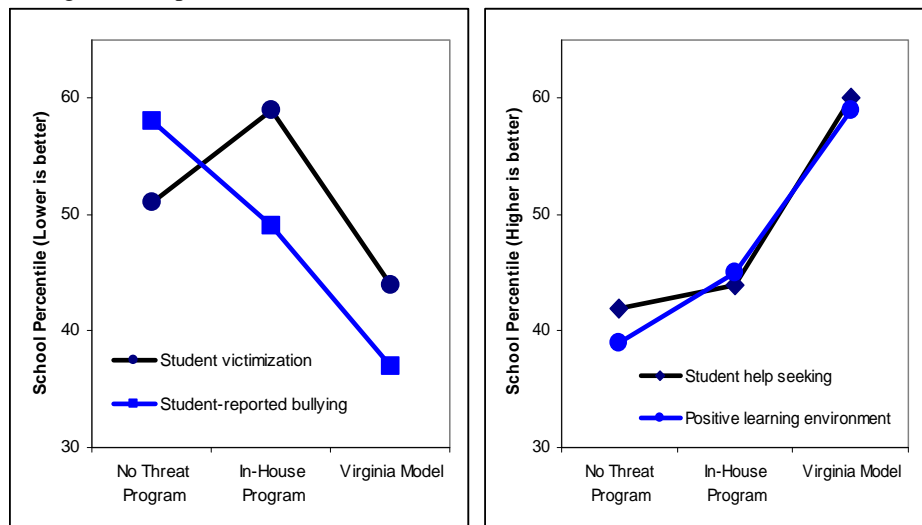


Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

Issue 2

How Should Schools Respond to Student Threats of Violence?

Since 2002, the Virginia Youth Violence Project in the Curry School of Education has provided training to Virginia school divisions on the use of *threat assessment* as an approach to violence prevention. According to the 2006-07 school safety audit survey completed by principals, 95 Virginia high schools are using the Virginia model, 54 have no formal process, and 131 have some other process, typically developed in-house. VHSSS survey results show that ninth grade students in schools using the Virginia model guidelines reported less bullying and victimization, greater willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence, and more positive perceptions of the learning environment (felt that teachers wanted them to do well and treated them fairly) than students in either of the other two groups of schools. In addition, schools using the Virginia guidelines had fewer long-term suspensions.



Practical Suggestions. The Virginia model trains staff to use a decision tree and published set of guidelines to assess the seriousness of student threats, quickly resolve most threats and take more extensive action in more serious, substantive cases. Threat assessment takes a problem-solving approach to resolve conflicts, bullying, and teasing before they escalate into violence. Zero tolerance policies are not needed in using this approach. Although these findings support use of the Virginia model, a correlational study cannot demonstrate that use of the model caused these differences among schools, and it is possible that schools using the Virginia model had other positive characteristics that were not controlled in this study. The three groups did not differ, however, in school size, minority composition or socio-economic status of the student body, neighborhood violent crime, or the extent of security measures in the schools.

Study Overview. The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Safety conditions were measured using school discipline records, safety audit surveys, and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students and 2,900 9th grade teachers in 294 schools. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. The VHSSS was conducted by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Study conclusions do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of these state and federal agencies. For more information, see the website for the Virginia Youth Violence Project: <<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>>.